

To Think with the Whole Body

Katia Sepúlveda in Conversation with Nina Hoechtl

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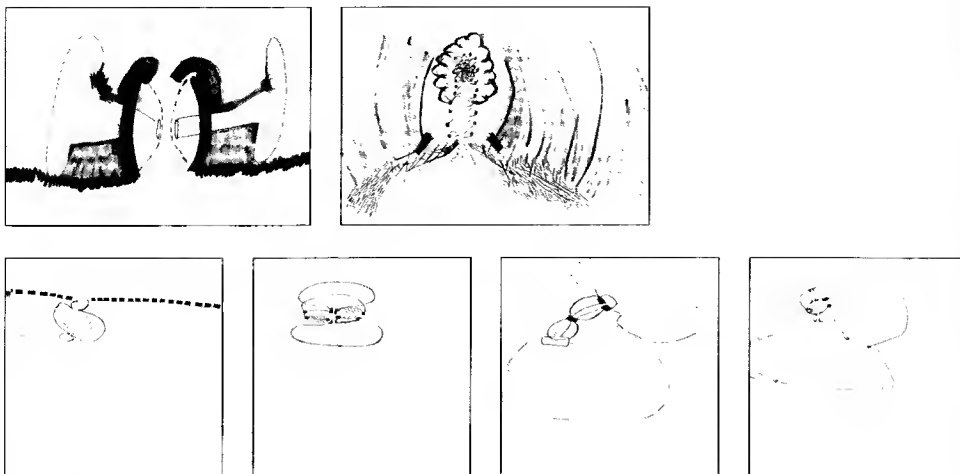
The video *Wish* (2010/11) is projected on two screens and the song "Black Wish" by The Last Poets fills the small seminar room of the program of gender studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). All of us, participants of the seminar "Del queer al cuir: desplazamiento geopolítico sur y desde las periferias" (From queer to cuir: Geopolitical displacement from the south and the peripheries), organized by the poet, essayist, and performer Sayak Valencia, rock our bodies to the song's rhythm and at the end of the video we start a heated debate about gloves, white, brown, black, feminine, masculine, trans-hands, fisting, and post-porn. I am sitting—by chance and unknowingly—close to Katia Sepúlveda, the Chilean artist whose video has just been presented. She has been living in Germany over the last nine years. Soon enough we get to talk, I thank her for the presentation, and three years later I write her an e-mail, asking if she would be interested in a conversation for a publication in Europe. A few hours later I find her consent in the inbox. The following exchange came about through several e-mails in a hybrid of German and Spanish, revisions and translations, over a period of one month from the middle of February to the middle of March 2015.

Nina Hoechtl: Antes que todo quisiera agradecerte por aceptar hacer la conversación también en tu segunda lengua, en alemán, mi primer lengua. VIELEN LIEBEN DANK, KATIA! So let me start off our conversation by asking right away about the possibility of translation and the borders of language(s). What relation do you have with Spanish, German, and English? Do they enable a different agency and/or do you pay greater attention to cultural borderlands, crossings, and in-between spaces?

Katia Sepúlveda: Indeed, translatability. I think that everything is a misinterpretation. Eurocentrism has always, from times immemorial to the present day, attempted to dominate through its culture. Through visual language, which I consider a world language, I'm in motion. That is its advantage, and I rely on the image wherever I am.

Spanish is my mother tongue. I am always thinking in Spanish. German is my second language, and English is simply an internationalism. These three languages grant me more space in my mind.

I am always on the move, and my life is configured by this mobility. During the last three years I've lived in three different countries and I've been traveling a lot. You can see it in the following three works of mine: *Wahrheit* (2014) in Germany; *Pancoreograficx* (2014), a collaboration with Sayak Valencia in Tijuana (Mexico); and *¿Feminismo Mapuche?* (2013–14) in Temuco (Chile). I always feel at home in the transdisciplinary, the transnational, and the transfeminist. I don't believe in resistance, I believe in transformation.



Figs. 14–19
Katia Sepúlveda, *Untitled*, 2005

NH: You position yourself as a transfeminist mestiza sudaka, who, through your works, seeks to address concepts that come from transfeminism, decolonization, and/or white, black or mestiza feminism. Could you elaborate on the meanings of transfeminism, mestiza, and sudaka, since these terms, while crucial for an adequate understanding of your work, are not so common in the European context?

KS: For transfeminism I always use the definition of Sayak Valencia, as it is the most precise one we have: "Transfeminism [...] integrates the element of mobility between genders, corporealities, sexualities, and geopolitics through the creation of strategies applicable in situ. These strategies are identified with the Deleuzean idea of minorities, multiplicities, and singularities that make up a reticular organization capable of a critical reappropriation of gender, race, class, and sexuality with a decolonial perspective."¹

I clearly remember the following experience: In 2012 I gave a talk about transfeminism at an event in Cologne. To my surprise, there were no bio-males in the audience and the bio-females felt that in Germany there was no need for transfeminism, which was rather just something for peripheral countries such as Spain, South America, etc.² I think that the periphery is better backed by the state, is better organized, there's more money, and I think there is a better distribution of wealth than in Germany.

In Germany I spoke with bio-females from Australia, Finland, Spain, Austria, and also with Latinas. I had a German girlfriend and it was very difficult in Germany, as the women mainly came from a background of white feminism. So I began to read bell hooks, and my language became more radical, as I did not want to act like a white person any longer. Colonization traverses the body, and if you question the various colonial perspectives of your own subjectivity, then a transformation can take place, a transformation from what you once were into what you really want to be. For me this takes place, in principle, in everyday life, in the small things. I had to move to an "epistemological south" of Europe and so I started to travel more often to Spain. In 2011 I participated in the activist post-porn festival *Muestra Marrana* in Barcelona with my video *Wish*. This festival constituted for me a very effective way to promote decolonization and trans-feminism through images.

I don't believe in purity, I believe that we are all mestizo/a/xs, and that this is the place where our singularity appears. I use singularity as an antonym to individuality. We are all singular people, unique, and we can work in a collective from our own singularity.

I do not believe in the concept of race. Race does not exist; it is a colonial invention, hence identities can never be decided by the individual, they are established by white society, and the notion of mestizo, even though it is colonial, can be shifted, from insult into queer, as a claim. I think we are all mestizo/a/xs, in the sense that we are all a mix, and it is this mix that makes us singular. Singular, not individual, because there's a difference, and the difference lies within that uniqueness that entails new perspectives and different kinds of knowledge, combined with an awareness that collective work and constant exchange are important.

- 1 Translated from the Spanish: "El transfeminismo [...] integra el elemento de la movilidad entre géneros, corporalidades, sexualidades y geopolíticas para la creación de estrategias que sean aplicables in situ y se identifiquen con la idea deleuziana de minorías, multiplicidades y singularidades que conformen una organización reticular capaz de una reapropiación crítica del género, la raza, la clase y la sexualidad con perspectiva decolonial." Sayak Valencia, "Interferencias transfeministas y pospornográficas a la colonialidad del ver," in "Gesto decolonial," ed. Jill Lane, Marcial Godoy-Anatívia, and Macarena

Gómez-Barris, special issue, *e-misférica* 11, no. 1 (2014);

<http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/es/e-misferica-111-gesto-decolonial/valencia>.

- 2 I have taken the terms *biomujer*/*biohombre* (bio-female/bio-male) from B. Preciado's *Testo Yonqui* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, S.A., 2008), an English translation of which was published under the title *Testo Junkie* (2013). The categories thus named are the ones society uses to categorize a person as a man or a woman. I use them because I'm talking about the conceptualizations of the body and the performativity of gender.



Figs. 20–22
Katia Sepúlveda, *Lx jotx nostrx*, 2014

Sudaka is the claim that knowledge is not centred on the hegemony of Europe and the United States. It is also about the appropriation of a racial slur, similar to the word “queer,” which was originally an insult, but was changed through its appropriation. For example, in Chile queer is written as it is pronounced in Spanish: *cuir*. To me, sudaka is related to the global south, to all the various souths, to all dissident and non-hegemonic knowledge. Australians are also a sudaka insofar as they do not belong to the hegemony. They tend to be discriminated because of the kind of English they speak, and are often regarded as savages by the British. A Mexican is also a sudaka, even though geographically speaking they live in the northern hemisphere. The south begins in Tijuana. This also means to acknowledge the wisdom of people that have been exploited, looted by global capitalism.

NH: In your practice you often combine political and artistic issues through the use of words. I am thinking, for instance, of *Lx jotx nostrx* (2014), a graffiti that was collectively celebrated at different sites in Tijuana. The multilayered figure of the jotx—a homosexual—is united with a *nosotrx*, a we.³ In English the graffiti would read, “We homosexual.” In Spanish, however, an alternate spelling for mixed genders and/or for identities that are not covered by the feminine or masculine gender, and/or go beyond them, was applied through the x. Another example that comes to mind is your poster work *Hey you! you are a political fiction ... / Ey, tú! Tú eres una ficción política ...* (2012–13), that you mounted in English in various public spaces of Cologne (Germany) and in Spanish in Villa Alegre (Chile).

KS: I’m interested in getting the discourse out of the classroom so that it doesn’t just remain in books or in our minds. I’m interested in “thinking bodies.” Rationalism wants to make us believe that we can only think with our minds—but, what good is a mind without a body? The art of thinking consists in thinking with all our senses, with our whole body. As an artist I work with the technification of the body. We cannot talk about a capitalist body in the same way that we talk about a dissident body—to which decolonial and transaesthetics may be applied—as we cannot think about a dissident body outside the capitalist assemblage.⁴ Hence, the body becomes a critical tool of our times. It is for this reason that in some of my works I only use text, yet I think that everything is text—images too.

3 In Mexico *joto* or *jota* is a slang word used as an insult for a homosexual. *Jota* is mainly used for a visibly effeminate homosexual. There are countless folk etymologies that seek to explain the word’s origin. The historian Rob Buffington believes that the word comes from the cell block “J” (pronounced *jota* in Spanish) of the Federal Penitentiary in Mexico City, where formerly the overtly homosexual inmates were isolated. Rob Buffington, “Los Jotas: Contested Visions of Homosexuality in Modern Mexico,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 118–32.

4 In Spanish, Katia used the notion “agenciamiento” by Deleuze and Guattari,

which is used to describe the French concept of *agencement* and was translated into English as *assemblage*. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) describe *agencement* as follows: “We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another.” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 99.



Figs. 23–26

Katia Sepúlveda, *Pascha Revolution!*, 2012

NH: This performativity of texts and bodies is explicitly employed in your works *Showroom* (2009) and *Pascha Revolution!* (2012). To my mind, these works make the power of language and bodies come alive by triggering shifts and creating new realities.

KS: What I'm after with my performances is to get people to stop thinking only with their minds, and instead start thinking with their whole body. This is also intended as a form of depatriarchalization. The process of depatriarchalizing comes about in one way or another in all my works. The work *Showroom* enters into a direct dialogue with power. This power has a patriarchal structure, and, when it comes to government, it does not matter whether a bio-male or a bio-female makes the decisions. In 2009, a hospital was opened in Chile; with rented hospital beds and patients who were actors—everything was fake. That was an insult to the poor and outperformed any art exhibition or performance. President Michelle Bachelet was the lead performer of that show. As a performative gesture, I renamed the Palacio de la Moneda *Showroom*, and thereby intervened in the patriarchal architecture of the presidential palace.

The performance *Pascha Revolution!* raises the idea of a patriarchal architecture too. The megabrothel Pascha in Cologne is a space that is only made for bio-males and that makes me think about the privileged position of bio-males in this society. During the performance, the Australian artist Amy Rush and I undressed in front of Pascha's main entrance; we began to caress each other and had sex. Shortly thereafter we were sent packing by security.

NH: And that way, as you describe it on your website, you intervened in the "power architecture and the hyper-heteronormativity" that the Pascha performs. Another work of yours that intervenes in public space as much as it has a direct correlation with your autobiography is the video *La Marienstr.* 21 (2008). Your performative intervention in the history of a squatted building in Cologne transverses your relation to the "vicious white feminism," as you call it, coming from your own experience.

KS: I've lived on Marienstraße for over nine years. At first, this was a very hard experience for me. I arrived in 2005, and moved into a lesbian WG (German for shared apartment), which was run by Trude Menrath. There, I suffered maltreatment—such as exoticizing and colonial handling—at the hands of the white feminist rulers, who had no tolerance whatsoever for any deviation from the intellectual line everybody had to toe. One had to follow Frau Menrath's whims. A compañera from the WG,⁵ Enssie (from Iran) and I (from Chile) rallied for an uprising within the WG. We could not stand the oppression, and alongside other compañeras—Cecilia Grey (from Argentina), Kelly Cavalcanti (from Brazil), and Moni Becker (from Germany)—we fought the injustice that we were put through. Frau Menrath never gave up her queen-like power and kicked us all out into the street. She would manipulate all of her Latin-American migrant network into trying to convince me that what she was doing was the right thing. It was during this time that Moni introduced us to the work of bell hooks. As we went on reading bell hooks we further understood the situation we were living at home. I realized, through this experience, that multiculturalism does not exist, and that many times it is more comfortable to remain within the white feminist way of thinking rather than listen to other ways. I was lucky though, and I got another place to live in the house next door, also a squatted place, where I still live now.

5 According to the feminist decolonial theorist María Lugones, among Latinos the term *compañera* is used for the sort of relation that consists of joining forces and efforts and imagination in common political struggles. María Lugones with

Pat Alake Rosezelle, "Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models," in *Feminism and Community*, ed. Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Freedman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 135–45.



Figs. 27–29
Katia Sepúlveda, *Postsexual*, 2007

NH: This work was documented on video and Super 8 film. In my opinion, the performative actions of your works enter in different relations with their documentation—photography, video, or drawing—which are created by you, and thereby also have an impact on the actions themselves. In *Becoming Woman of Salvador Allende* (2013–14) you drew/wrote together with your mother. Another example is the, as you call it, video sculpture *Postsexual* (2007), where the performative act transforms itself into a sculpture on the stove. What do these different approaches mean for your practice?

KS: They mean that any new work I come up with creates a new language through the subject matter that I work with. It's also about surprising myself; it's a constant game. My conceptual framework, however, is always transfeminism, from which I cannot deviate; it is part of my daily life practice and my way of working.

For the commemoration of forty years of military coup in Chile (1973–2013), I proposed to do a work called *Becoming Women of Salvador Allende*. I was asked by the two curators, Stella Salineros and Monica Salineros, to select a quote by Salvador Allende. I researched and found the following phrase: “Yo soy cada día más partidario de las mujeres” (Each day I’m more in favor of women). I love this phrase. It feminizes the image of Allende, who is sacred to the Chilean bio-males of the left. So I invited my mother to write this sentence, as she had experienced the period of the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, an electoral coalition of left parties and groups that supported the presidential candidacy of Allende). This drawing is a recovery of my mother, who went through this whole process, and me, the product of an after-time. In the presence of the drawing, the two eras, my mother’s and my own, come together.

Postsexual is a piece in which the patriarchy is represented by a “dildo,” and its stage is represented by a frying pan in the kitchen. I wanted to make a video-sculpture; the goal was to produce a trace—the “sculpture,” of the time taken to shoot the video. The idea was to invoke the downfall of the patriarchy. The double sudaka patriarchy. With this gesture I kill my father and I actually deconstruct the patriarchy. Aesthetically speaking, it was pure delight to see how that thing was being melted down and peacefully transformed, which is the whole idea behind transfeminism: a radically peaceful revolution. It’s a piece dedicated to all the women who do reproductive work.

NH: The performative acts of framing your anus and fisting at the center of the videos *Ano* (2010) and *Wish* respectively, evade to various degrees a fixed identity—they relate to other media, comments about them, documentation, representations, and interact with each other. How do you develop your video language and the visual composition in the interplay with sound and the performative act itself?

KS: Well, these are two very different videos. In *Ano* I quote Peter Fleischmann’s emblematic film from Bavaria *Jagdszenen aus Niederbayern* (Hunting scenes from Bavaria, 1969), and therefore the video fits into the “found footage” genre. The film’s subject is homophobia and its biggest problem, i.e., the “anal terror.” When the video is played, my ass comes to the fore in order to destroy the myth. By doing so, I invoke the text “Terror Anal” (2009) by Paul B. Preciado. “Terror Anal” constitutes a radical dialogue with Guy Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire* (1972). It implies a revision of some thirty-plus years of struggle and the early positioning of the visionaries, as well as a defence of their outrage, if possible more angrily. That’s the anal challenge: a coup in working order, carved out of the very guts of heteronormativity. Yet, that is also its most terrifying promise ...



Fig. 30
Katia Sepúlveda, *Wish*, 2010/11

In the video *Wish*, the music is rather at the center. "Black Wish" of The Last Poets is a quote from a Black Panther song, which inspired the title of my video. The music determines the rhythm of the situation in the video, a constant "work in progress" of decolonial processes. Particularly after the experience in Marienstraße, I realized that I myself had used a white mask (Frantz Fanon). I tried to get rid of it, so I came up with the following: white gloves are caressing and fisting a white ass (from a German) and when the gloves are removed black skin remains to be "discovered" by fisting. I did this in order to exorcise myself.

NH: You refer in your works to theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Paul B. Preciado, but also to Beatriz Colomina, bell hooks, Julieta Paredes, Deleuze and Guattari. What form do your processes of fusion or crossover of theory back into practice take? How do you deal with the tension between theory and practice? A tension that, in my view, makes itself particularly felt when you're dealing with subjects that are controversially discussed within a society. I am thinking, for example, of your installation *Feminism Mapuche? Technologies of Disobedience* (2013–14), which takes off from the question, "Does the feminism Mapuche exist?"

KS: Philosophy and art are technologies; theory comes from the Greek word meaning "looking at," "to view" ... I like concepts. I wanted to create a work to figure out if the feminism Mapuche exists. That was weighing on my mind after I had read the Aymara feminist activist writer Julieta Paredes, who claims that we inherited a double-junction patriarchy, the one of the Spaniards, and the one of the indigenous groups.⁶ I wanted to know what was going on with the Mapuche bio-females in the south of Chile, because it is right there that the heightened conflict takes place.

The Mapuche conflict is a delicate one. It all began with the colonization of Chile, when the Mapuche people had reached certain agreements with the Spaniards over land ownership. The problem was the creole or mestizo population—an offspring of both Mapuche and Spaniards, who were for a long time ostracized by these two. As time went by the new state took over more and more of the Mapuche land, the most valuable of all things for the Mapuche. Then the Chilean state decided to classify the Mapuche struggle as a terrorist one, and many have been unjustly incarcerated for defending their land. In recent years the conflict has escalated and the level of state violence has become progressively worse. The south of Chile is almost a site of war these days, but a war that remains largely invisible. What I'm telling you here is just a brief recap. I think most Chileans do not identify with the Mapuche struggle—it is only a very small minority that cares about this issue, and most of those who offer help have little to no political power.

There are some stories that claim before colonial times the Mapuche (which, by the way, means "people of the land") was a matriarchal society, but there is no evidence for this. That is why I wondered if there was such a thing as a Mapuche feminism. So I went to Temuco (the town where the Mapuche border begins) with this question in mind. I interviewed various women: artists, activists, scholars, and my questions were always about the role of bio-females within the Mapuche struggle. I often got similar answers: I was told that the women had given up the fight for their own interests and against sexism in favor of the bigger cause. For them, feminism is too much of a white word, but they are trying to find an adequate term in their Mapudungun language. However, since they haven't succeeded yet, at the moment they say there is no such thing as Mapuche feminism. Since the land is the main issue at stake, some women did not want to talk openly about feminism, thinking it'd be a betrayal of the Mapuche struggle. Men were entitled to the land during colonial times; they were the right holders and so they became the leaders of the struggle. The Mapuche struggle's objective is to reclaim the land and declare its independence as a nation. I think this is a dangerous thought because as a transfeminist I believe the best thing to do is to abolish the idea of a nation all at once. The clearest example of how bad an idea it can be is Hitler. I find it a very masculine idea anyway. Within the Mapuche movement there are exceptions: some bio-females—mothers who have had their sons or husbands murdered—have raised their voices, but they are still a minority. These women have retreated to their households, taking care

6 Julieta Paredes, *Hilando Fino. Desde el feminismo comunitario* (La Paz: DED, Comunidad Mujeres Creando Comunidad, 2010), 24.

of the children and their culture. There has been a marked increase in femicides, and homophobia is widespread. Very few bio-females have access to higher education, but there are some, which is why I made the connection between Julieta Paredes's text, in which she addresses a double-junction patriarchal heritage, both from colonial and indigenous pasts, because I recognize this nowadays in the Mapuche conflict, where masculine issues seem more important than those of bio-females. The fundamental problem is the patriarchal structure, and that is precisely what I tried to highlight through a sound choreography in my piece *Feminismo Mapuche?* in which the affected women spoke in the first person, without mediators.

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